



Sermon Title: “*The Holy Mystery of Baptism*”

Scripture: Mark 1:4-11

Pastor: Mike Lyle

Date: January 8, 2012

This day of remembering the baptism of Jesus is also a good time to recall our own baptism and to consider baptism in general. Like many churchy things, baptism can seem confusing, but it is really very simple.

It doesn't matter if the person being baptized is one day old, or one hundred years old. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism (not christening, baptism) is the thing that happens to them with the water. It can happen at any age, because God is the prime mover (not the preacher, not the family of the baptized, and not the one being baptized). It's God's event. That's why we don't re-baptize. God doesn't make mistakes, or require retakes.

But while knowing this helps us with a better understanding of the sacrament, it doesn't plumb the depths of meaning and power inherent in the sacrament.

We could get theological about baptism, but let's get personal about it instead. Let's get personal about it, because Mark doesn't give us a theology of baptism, he gives us Jesus of Nazareth soaking wet in the river Jordan.

I've read books on baptism, heard lectures on baptism, and written papers on baptism, but most of all I've been up close and personal in the act of baptism.

John did not feel worthy to baptize Jesus. I've never felt worthy to baptize anybody either, and I doubt I ever will. And yet I do it, and every time, EVERY time, it's like the first time, it's special, it's a holy mystery beyond my comprehension.

And unlike communion where we preachers learn early on how not to spill Welch's on the white altar cloths, or the embroidered kneelers, or Mrs. Maggilacuddy's Sunday dress, baptism is always uncontrollably messy.

I've baptized in a swimming pool. I've baptized in a baptismal tank we were allowed to use at a Baptist church. I've baptized at an array of baptismal fonts. No matter how, or where, the water (just like the Holy Spirit) has a life of its own.

Either I get wet, or the person's hair and clothes get wet, or water runs down into the babies little eyes or ears, or drips onto the pages of my book of worship, or my hymnal, or all of the above.

Baptism (like the Holy Spirit) is beyond anybody's power to control.

I've never seen the heavens torn apart, or the Spirit descending like a dove, but I have seen grace enter individual lives, and I've seen it fill a church, and wash over a congregation like the bracing tide it is. And I have seen the holy mystery etched on

people's faces as they knelt before God, and a congregation, so baptism's water could run down over them. And I've seen the holy mystery etched on the faces of those who present their beloved children and grandchildren for the sacrament.

I've seen a man who would never otherwise consider doing anything undignified, kneel before a church full of people in his best suit for baptism's water to be poured on his head where it ran down his hair, and down onto his expensive collar, coat, and tie.

I've held infants who were afraid, and infants who were sleeping, and infants who were just relaxed and curious; but all of whom are startled when the water comes. What can they possibly think at that moment?

Never in their little lives have they encountered anything but sensible love and care, and here they are all dressed up, along with their parents, grandparents, other family and friends, and they are the very center of attention in an unusually decorated large room where they are handed over to a stranger wearing odd clothes who dumps water on them.

I have powerfully mixed emotions in those seconds during which I hold the infant. I am reluctant to unsettle them with the water, but I am electrified too, because I know something is going on that is lasting, and holy, and fraught with meaning beyond my comprehension, beyond any human comprehension, beyond even time and space.

It doesn't matter how much water, or the source of the water, or the way the water is administered, but baptism itself matters a great deal. It's our passage, our rite of entry, into the family of God.

The proper place for the baptismal font in any church is by the door, so that we are all reminded every time we enter or depart that we entered first and foremost through the sacrament of holy baptism. Here, where there are several doors and two aisles, we make the baptismal font as prominent as practically possible, as much as possible, both at the back and here at the front of the church.

And even though I've baptized in places other than church buildings, those places were always populated with as many church members as I could get there, because baptism isn't a private affair. It's an act in which the entire community of faith participates. We all remember our baptism, and we all renew our promises to live faithfully, for and with the newly baptized, every time the sacrament is celebrated.

Baptism is God's act in the church. People find it hard to understand when I urge them to become part of a community of faith before having their child baptized. They have been led to believe that it's just something you drop in at a church someplace and do, like getting a flu shot, or getting your oil changed. It doesn't matter where it happens as long as it happens. But baptism is God's act in the church. It happens in the midst of a community of the faithful, a community that renews its own baptismal vows along with the person or family. It's everybody's promise to live more faithfully together, and support one another in sacred community, in the midst of God's abundant holy mysteries.

I've never seen the heavens torn apart, or the Spirit descending like a dove, but I once participated in the baptism of a woman who had lived all of her life in a world of poverty, abuse, ignorance, harshness, and strife. She was a small woman whom life and rough men had treated badly. Late in her life, as the recipient of the help and friendship of a United Methodist church, she began her journey toward God. Eventually, she decided she wanted to be baptized and to join the church.

Although it certainly wasn't a requirement, she felt that she needed to be dressed in a certain way for her baptism and so some ladies of the church took her to buy a new dress (quite possibly the only new dress of her life) for the occasion. When the moment of her baptism came, she surprised us all. Instead of kneeling for the sacrament, she stepped up onto the kneeler and stood there, her face looking toward heaven. (I guess somewhere inside her was the feeling that she had been called up higher at last, and that the closer she got to heaven the better, for the heavenly blessing of baptism.)

After a few awkward moments she stepped down, and knelt, and was baptized. She wept. So did a lot of others.

That poor woman, among all of us present in that upper middle class congregation that Sunday morning, was the one who most vividly and thoroughly understood what was going on. Perhaps better than any of the rest of us present for her baptism, she best understood what baptism is all about as she stepped triumphantly, even if only for a moment, out of the sadness and tragedy of life and into the full, glorious light of God's new day.

And so on this day of remembering Jesus' baptism, let's remember other baptisms as well. Let's remember our baptism, and the baptisms of those we know and love. Let's behold one another, and reflect upon what it means to be part of a community of the baptized. Let us remember our baptism and be thankful, very thankful indeed.

Amen.